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CHANAKYA

INDIAN HISTORY THROUGH HER STATESMEN

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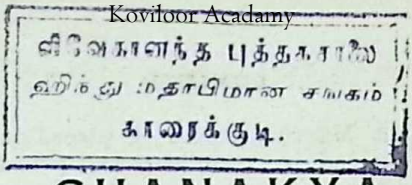

CHANAKYA

Chanakya stands out as the first great historical statesman of the world. And for India, he was also the first great liberator who freed Hindustan from the grip of foreign conquerors and built the first and greatest constitutional Empire ever known in this land.

He has been called the Bismark of India, the wisest of diplomats, far excelling Machiavelli in statecraft. And yet, until recently, very little has been said of him in our history books. And what little is said pictured him in the blackest of colours as a wily, crooked counsellor.

The reason is not far to seek. It is all part of the mistaken policy of distorting history. Fair and independent British historians themselves admit it. As Professor Havell admirably puts it, Indians have been constantly told "that in political science, India has never attained to the highest level in Europe ; that Freedom has never spread her wings over their native land ; that they are heirs to untold centuries of 'Oriental despotism' and must wait patiently until the highly cultured political fruits of the West can be successfully grown in the virgin soil of India."

"No greater spiritual injury can be done to a people," he adds, "than to teach them to undervalue or despise the achievements of their forefathers. To overvalue them can hardly be a mistake."

That explains the oblivion into which Chanakya has been thrown by the writers of text-book history. But with the growth of historical research by Indian scholars, the greatness of Chanakya comes more and more into light.

Chanakya was a Brahmin, well-versed in polity and statecraft. His name was Vishnugupta and from his father, Chanaka, who himself was a teacher of *niti*, he derived the name of Chanakya. He is also known by the name of Kautilya. History records that he was the Prime Minister and preceptor

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of Chandragupta Maurya, whom he placed on the throne of Magadha and helped to consolidate and preserve his mighty empire. He was the author of *Arthasastra*, the greatest ancient work on polity.

Interesting details of Chanakya's life are preserved in Sanskrit works, notably in the drama, *Mudra-Rakshasa*.

After the Greek Conquest

About the year 325 B. C., Northern India was in a chaotic state. Long years of peaceful Indo-Aryan rule had been broken up by the invasion of Alexander. Many of the northern provinces, including the Punjab, had fallen into the hands of the Greeks. And in Magadha, a race of imbecile Kings, the Nandas, held their futile sway.

Chandragupta was a kinsman of the Nandas. Of his royal descent, there is no dispute, though prejudiced Greek writers have set it down that he was of low extraction.

Tradition ascribes that the Nandas subjected Chandragupta to untold sufferings. All his relations were burnt to death and he himself was put in a dungeon.

At this time, runs the story, the Raja of Simhala sent to the court of the Nandas, a lion of wax in a cage so well made that it seemed to be a live one. And he added the message: "If any one of your courtiers can make this fierce animal run without opening the cage, I shall acknowledge him to be a man of talent."

The dull Nandas could not understand the purport of the message. But Chandragupta, who heard of it in his dungeon, offered to undertake the task, if they would spare his life. And this was allowed.

He heated a piece of iron red-hot and thrusted it into the figure of the wax-lion. The wax soon melted and "ran" and the lion disappeared.

This act of wisdom won him his freedom and much as the Nandas desired Chandragupta's death, they were forced to allow him to live in affluence.

"He was gifted with all the marks of royalty ; his arms reached to his knees ; he was affable, liberal and brave ; but

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these deserts only increased the animosity of the Nandas and they waited for an opportunity of compassing his death."

Throne Promised

Once, Prince Chandragupta observed a Brahman of such irrascible temperament that he violently tore up a tuft of *kusa* grass, because a blade of it had pierced his foot. Seeing this, he approached him and placed himself under his protection. And this Brahman was Chanakya.

Chandragupta told him of all the cruel persecutions he had suffered at the hands of the Nandas. And Chanakya, moved at his tale of woes, promised him not only protection but the throne of the persecutors.

Soon after, feeling hungry, the story goes on, Chanakya entered the guest chamber of the Nandas' palace and seated himself at a place of honour.

The arrogant Nandas, regarding him as a wild scholar of no value, ordered him to be thrust from the seat. The ministers in vain protested against the act. But the princes forcibly dragged him from his seat.

This insolent treatment filled Chanakya with rage. Standing in the centre of the hall, Chanakya,blind with indignation, pointed to the loosened locks of hair, and took this fearful vow : " Until I have exterminated these haughty and ignorant Nandas, who have not known my worth, I will not again tie the hair."

Neither the King nor the Princes made any attempt to pacify him ; and he left the city.

Fight Begins

Chandragupta also followed him. And the Brahman, possessed of the Prince, resorted to various stratagems for the destruction of the Nandas. His first act was to send a friend Indusarman, disguised as a Buddhist monk, to mislead Rakshasa, the learned Minister of the Nandas, whilst on the other hand he incited a powerful King of a certain hilly kingdom, Parvatendra, to invade Magadha. Chanakya promised half the kingdom to the Monarch of the Hills and with a redoubt-

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able army of hill-warriors he marched against Kusumapura, the capital of the Nandas.

The Nandas prepared to resist the invaders, relying on the valour of Rakshasa. He exerted all his prowess, but in vain; and finding it impossible to overcome the hostile forces by force of arms, he attempted to get get rid of Chandragupta by stratagems. But in the meantime, the story goes on, "all the Nandas perished like moths in the flame of Chanakya's revenge, supported by the troops of Parvatendra."

Rakshasa now saw no way of escape. Worn in body and in mind, and having lost his troops and treasures, he realized that the city could no longer be defended. He, therefore, secretly effected the retreat of the old King and a few of the loyal citizens and surrendered the city to Chandragupta, pretending that he had been won over to his cause.

But he waited for a suitable opportunity to do away with the new King. To this end, he resorted to black magic and created a "poisoned maid" to destroy the Prince. But Katuilya, who was keeping constant guard over his princely ward, detected it and diverting her on to Parvatendra, caused his death. He also contrived to have that information conveyed to Malayaketu, the son of Parvatendra. That Prince, anxious for his own safety, fled away from the camp.

Chanakya was now the master of the capital. Yet he did not enter it at once. Full well he knew that there were still many citizens cherishing the memory of the Nandas. And he feared further traps from Rakshasa, whose allegiance Chanakya next tried to secure.

Masterly Diplomacy

Sorely disappointed at the failure of all his schemes, as a last resort Rakshasa went to Malayaketu and roused his anger against Chandragupta. He exhorted the Prince to avenge the death of his father and promised to fight for him and said that even in the city there were a number of nobles and citizens who only waited for the first sign of a foreign invader to rise into open rebellion against Chandragupta.

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Now that there were no legitimate heirs of the Nandas for the kingdom, he promised to place Malayaketu himself on the throne.

Having thus excited the ardour of the Prince, Rakshasa marched against Chandragupta at the head of an army of formidable hillmen.

Chandragupta was prepared to meet the invaders on the field of battle. But Chanakya avoided it by wrecking the plans of Rakshasa with his diplomacy. By various Machiavellian stratagems, he created dissensions in Malayaketu's camp and created such a strong suspicion against Rakshasa himself, that Malayaketu began to suspect that Rakshasa was in fact secretly on the side of Chandragupta planning to destroy his last formidable foe.

Meanwhile, Chanakya staged an interlude by which it appeared as though, Chandragupta, intolerant of Kautilya's increasingly arrogant interference in everything, had displeased him. He dissembled a scene in which Chandragupta dismissed the Brahman Premier in open court. And naturally this news reached the ears of Rakshasa and Malayaketu.

And this fact added to Malayaketu's suspicions. The secret agents of Chanakya did their work so skilfully that Malayaketu believed that Rakshasa was now secretly on the side of Chandragupta. The circumstantial evidence skilfully manufactured by the secret agents of Kautilya was also so perfect that, faced with them, Rakshasa had to bow his head in shame before Malayaketu when he openly accused him of treachery. Rakshasa, therefore, left the camp in utter disappointment.

The Final Triumph

Meanwhile, many of the lesser chiefs had deserted the camp and it was an easy matter for Chandragupta to pursue the fleeing hordes of Malayaketu and make him a prisoner.

Chanakya's aim from the beginning had been to win over Rakshasa to the side of Chandragupta. For he knew that as long as that loyal minister remained hostile, his own ward would never be safe on the throne. To that end was every one of Kautilya's schemes directed.

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His master-stroke was the arrest of Chandanadasa, a big merchant and one of the staunchest friends of Rakshasa, followed soon after by the order that he be executed for failing to disclose the hiding place of the family of Rakshasa. That loyal friend chose rather to die than to betray the sacred trust bestowed on him by a loving friend. And Chanakya contrived this piece of information to be conveyed to Rakshasa, who, as was expected, hastened to the scene and offered his own life in the place of Chandanadasa. That was the opportunity for Kautilya to win him over to his side. And as the price of Chandanadasa's life he demanded the life-long loyalty to the house of Chandragupta. If Rakshasa refused, Chandana would immediately lose his life. Faced with this dilemma, Rakshasa consented.

Chanakya made him at once the Prime Minister and released Chandanadasa. He also ordered the release of Malayaketu, to please Rakshasa. With his mission and vow thus fulfilled, Chanakya retired into solitude and sanyas as befitted a true Brahman.

The character of Chanakya, as delineated in *Mudra-Rakshasa*, emerges as a master-diplomat beating his adversaries at every step in the crafty game of endless stratagems.

"I have my spies abroad" he says.

"——— they roam the realm
In various garbs disguised, in various tongues,
And manners skilled, and prompt to wear the show
Of zeal to either party, as need serves.
At home, my agents, versed in every gift
And quaint device, maintain assiduous quest
Amongst the people of the capital,
And instant note amidst the multitude
The covert friends of Nanda and his Minister.
The chiefs, whose ready aid placed Chandragupta
Firm on his throne, are faithful to his cause
And careful servants keep unwearied watch
To baffle those who would administer
Envenomed draughts and viands to the king."

Even the loyal Rakshasa, himself a great and wise diplomat, learned in all the crooked ways of plotting and counter-plotting, had to admit his powerlessness before the superior skill of Chanakya.

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" The vile Chanakya ! " he exclaims. " But rather," he corrects himself, " the wise Chanakya, an exhaustive mine of learning—a deep ocean of wisdom, stored with gems of richest excellence. Let not any envy him his merits."

Other characters in the play too, admits even such a prejudiced historian as Vincent Smith, consider him as a great and wise Brahman and respect him as a holy *sanyasin.*

Chanakya never desired any power for himself. His only mission was to place the wise Prince Chandragupta safely on the throne and consolidate the empire on solid foundations. His was the hand that raised the Prince to the throne of the mightiest empire of Hindustan. His word was law. But yet, he never left his humble hut to live in the splendid palatial mansions, set apart for the King's ministers.

" This is Chanakya's house," says a character in the play. " And a splendid mansion for a minister ! Here is a bit of stone for bruising cow-dung fuel ; here is a bundle of holy grass collected by the disciples—and the old walls from which a thatched roof projects are covered by a parcel of fuel struck up to dry. Chandragupta merits such a minister.....And to him a monarch is no more than a wisp of straw."

The Mighty Empire

The year 321 B. C. saw the ascension of Chandragupta.

" The lesson of Alexander's raid," adds Professor Havell, " was not lost upon Chandragupta and his crafty Brahman counsellor, for they quickly followed up their first successes by compelling or *persuading* all the smaller States of Northern India to acknowledge the suzerainty of Magadha, so that in a few years' time, Chandragupta's empire stretched from sea to sea and Aryavarta, instead of being torn asunder by the dissensions and rivalries and feuds of numerous tribal confederations, was united under a strong central Government, and could present an unbroken front to any foreign aggressor.

" The political wisdom of this policy was justified seventeen years later, when Selukos, the most powerful of Alexander's Generals, sought to add to his dominions the Indian provinces Alexander had conquered."

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Selukos was destined to a sad disappointment. No doubt he relied on the splendid discipline of the Greek forces who, under Alexander had won such glorious victories. But times were changed. Alexander had none but petty chieftains to oppose him. Porus, in spite of his great valour, was but the chief of a small tribe. And it was no wonder that his gallant soldiers were no match before the splendidly organized phalanx of one of the greatest soldiers of history.

Selukos found a very different foe to reckon with in Chandragupta. The might of the Empire, a finely disciplined Army with a splendid organization and command opposed him on the borders of India, as he crossed the Indus.

The result was a crushing defeat for the Greek general. The vaunted glory of the military superioity of the West was thus hurled to the dust and Selukos was " not only compelled to retire hastily, but had to submit to a humiliating bargain, by which he ceded to his Indian rival large districts west of the Indus, extending as far as the modern cities of Kabul and Herat by way of dowry for a daughter sent to Chandragupta's Zenana, in exchange for a hundred elephants."

A treaty of friendship was signed; ambassadors were exchanged between the courts of the two great Empires. The Greek Ambassador at Pataliputra was Megasthenes, who wrote a detailed account of the India of those times, the preserved fragments of which furnish a valuable piece of historical record.

Autonomous Units

Megasthenes' account confirms in many respects the conditions prevailing in India as laid down in Kautilya's *Artha Sastra*. And the glimpse we get of the Mauryan administration, of which Chanakya was the presiding genius, is that of a highly systematized form of government, even better in many respects than the most advanced governments of Western civilization.

The whole empire was based on the hearty co-operation of the villages and republican clans of the Punjab, who had full autonomy in the management of their internal affairs. It was only in times of national emergency, like those of war, famine and foreign invasions, that the suzerain State stepped in.

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As one British historian remarks, "the Indo-Aryan constitution, built up by the highest intelligence of the people upon the basis of village communities, and not wrung from unwilling war-lords and landlords by century-long struggles and civil wars, secured to the Indian peasant-proprietor, not only the ownership of the land, but very considerable powers of self-government. The powers of the central Government, were delegated to it by the peoples themselves and limited by unwritten laws which, by common consent, were given a religious character."

Chandragupta himself was no despot. He was a constitutional emperor, crowned by the common consent of the people and history records that he had to bow to the verdict of the popular assembly and his Council of Ministers.

Cabinet Responsibility

Chanakya was the *Pradhan*, or president of the council, which performed its functions in exactly the same way as the British Cabinet of the present day governs the affairs of Britain. Each member of the council was in charge of a particular department, assisted by two under-secretaries.

" Collectively," says Prof. Havell, " the council met to discuss departmental finances, foreign affairs, and all other important matters, sometimes with or sometimes without the presence of the Sovereign. They appointed provincial Governors, dapartmental chiefs and all the highest officers of the State. The council generally initiated all important business, the opinions of absent members being given in writing. The resolutions of the council were signed and sealed by each member in order of precedence.

"Megasthenes," continues the Professor, "testified to the high character and wisdom of Chandragupta's councillors, and to the power they held in the State. Chandragupta's rule was thus not the despotism of an absolute monarch, but a constitutional government formed after the Aryan tradition of the empire, in which, theoretically at least, the people's will was the only source of the divine right of kings. This principle was asserted in the oath which every Indo-Aryan King took at the religious ceremony, in which he received

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royal authority from the people's hands: "May I be deprived of heaven, life and off-spring if I oppress you."

Local Self-Government

Trade, commerce and industry were based on the co-operative principle, which was well understood in ancient India. And the State encouraged international trade by granting bounties and other facilities.

Municipal administration was also well developed. Pataliputra, the capital of the Mauryan Empire, was a magnificent city and was controlled by a municipal board of 30 members, divided into six committees.

"The first committee controlled the industries and handicrafts of the city. The second one was in charge of the arrangements for travellers and pilgrims visiting the city providing them with accommodation and, when necessary with food and medical attendance. The third committee was charged with the registration of births and deaths. The fourth regulated the sales of produce, weights and measures and issued licenses to merchants. The fifth performed the same duties in regard to manufactures and the sixth collected tithes on all goods sold in the city. The city council also collectively administered general affairs, such as finance, sanitation, water-supply, the provision and up-keep of public buildings, fruit and flower-gardens. The bye-laws of the city imposed fines upon persons defiling public roads or reservoirs or for allowing dead animals or human corpses to pollute public places. Special routes were prescribed for funeral processions and no corpses were allowed to be buried or cremated except in the public cemeteries and cremation grounds. In short, Pataliputra in the fourth century before Christ seems to have been a thoroughly well-organized city and administered according to the best principles of social science."

In Times of Crisis

The roads were kept scrupulously clean and it is interesting to know that no thatched houses were allowed in great cities. Extraordinary precautions were taken against fires and Chanakya lays down that vessels filled with water should be kept in rows along the main streets and public squares and

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and in front of the royal palace. And every householder had to keep ladders, axes, hooks, baskets, and leather bags, and, in case of fire in a neighbour's house, was required to run to his help—the fine for neglecting to do so being a heavy one.

The enumeration of the details of famine-relief work by Kautilya shows to how great an extent the responsibilities of the State to its subjects were recognized. In the first place, it was ordained that half the stores in the Government warehouses should be kept in reserve for times of famine. When famine occurred, the State distributed relief from this reserve, provided seed-grain for the next harvest and started public works to keep the people remuneratively employed. The wealthy were called upon to subscribe for the relief of the poor, and when possible, the State undertook the removal of the population to more fertile regions.

Greek writers have mentioned that magnificent roads totalling thousands of miles linked the cities of the great empire. The department of irrigation was one of the best. The State itself maintained ferry boats, which merchants and travellers could use for a small hire.

The maintenance of public health was recognized as a most important duty of the State and free medical aid was given by hospitals established throughout the land. Even in the Imperial palace, an entire garden was set apart for the cultivation of medical plants and Kautilya mentions that regular replenishment of the dispensaries with drugs and medicines from the Royal Medical store was strictly enforced.

Imperial Defence

The organization of the Army was perfect. It was composed of six hundered thousand infantry, swordsmen and archers, and thirty thousand cavalry and eight thousand chariots drawn by two or four horses and nine thousand elephants each seating three bow-men. There was also an effective navy and both the army and navy were under a commission of thirty well-trained generals and admirals. The commission was divided into six boards, the first of which controlled the navy, the second, the army transport and commissariat services, the third the infantry, the fourth

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the cavalry, while the fifth and the last controlled the war-chariots and elephant forces respectively.

Another feature of the reign of Chandragupta, which has struck many foreign historians with marvel, was the perfectly organized system of espionage. It easily beats, in every respect, the highly developed spy-webs which modern Powers are obliged to maintain.

Chanakya's spies were not merely men of evil and *agents provacateur*. Their office combined the duties of the inspecting official, police detective, military spy and that of the modern journalist.

They had to be touring the country, constantly informing the Government of the state of public opinion. They sent confidential reports of the working of departmental administrations and of the conduct of officials and acted as a check upon the arbitrary conduct of State officials far away from the personal supervision of the authorities at the capital.

The organization of spies by Chanakya has been much misrepresented by certain writers. But it was certainly far better and more humane than that of the present-day.

"In principle, at least," remarks a British writer, "the ancient spy system of Chanakya had much to recommend it and stood on a far higher moral plane than that of the present day. Greek accounts, which bear witness to Indian honesty and veracity, declare that Chandragupta and Chanakya were well served by their secret agents and their reports could always be considered trustworthy."

Drink and Gambling

Another notable experiment of Chanakya was the control and regulation of the drink-traffic and gambling. Prejudiced writers have put it down that one of the ways in which the State derived revenue was through the licensing of drink-shops and gambling halls. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Two of the vices of the Aryan nobles and the upper class of those days were excessive gambling and drink. And the wise minister tried his best to curb and regulate the evils.

If the only concern of the State was revenue, as these writers impute, there was no need for such strict regula-

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tions as we find laid down by Chanakya in his *Artha-Sastra.*

No taverns or gambling halls were allowed in villages. Only in towns were these allowed, and even there, the number was limited and were under strict supervision.

Kautilya lays down that the taverns had to be decently furnished and provided with " scents, flowers and water, and other comfortable things according to the season, so that the lure of the drink should not be the only attraction." Moreover, inspectors or "spies" stationed in the taverns took note of the " habitues." They also noted the value of the jewellery and other valuables in the possession of the customers who were intoxicated, for in the event of robbery, the tavern-keeper had not only to make good the loss, but was liable to a fine of the same amount. And in the gambling halls of the towns, there were official superintendents who " supplied the proper dices and saw that the game was fair."

There was a highly developed system of passports and custom inspection throughout the Empire. It is interesting to note that articles of luxury were heavily taxed, while articles of food and clothes were modestly assessed. Medicines and medical plants were exempt from tax.

The administration of justice was prompt and alert. Petty offences were left to be decided by the community of panchayats and the State stepped in only in the case of major crimes. Though Chanakya himself was a Brahman, points out another historian, it is remarkable that he does not exempt them from heavy fines or major punishments.

Perhaps one gets a fair idea of Chanakya's enlightened statesmanship when it is noted that he laid down a minimum wage which has been possible in civilised Europe only twenty-two centuries later.

Kingly Duties : Not Prerogatives

Greek writers allege that though Chandragupta was the author of India's liberty, he soon turned a despot and was severe and cruel. And taking the cue, British historians of the stamp of Vincent Smith have painted him in the darkest of colours. But one could hardly expect the Greek historians

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to be fair to an emperor who had thrown off their yoke, exploded the myth of their invincibility and subjected them to a humiliating treaty.

But any way, Chandragupta was not a despot, points out Professor Havell, as Darius of Persia. He had won his way with the republican clans of the Punjab and never interferred with the rights of the Aryan freemen. Kautilya always upholds their right and treats of the "duties" of a King towards his subjects and never of his divine prerogatives.

"Chandragupta's Government," says Professor Havell, "was a firm and strong one but not of military force alone. He had no dreams of world conquest. His policy and that of his astute minister was to consolidate the strength of Aryavarta, not to create an autocracy after the Persian model. The republican form of Government which obtained among many Aryan tribes was not suppressed. Neither were the traditional rights of the village communities ignored in the bureaucratic control set up by the Mauryan Imperial Government for the purpose of removing the weakness of Indo-Aryan polity. It need not be assumed that the popular assemblies lost their political influence."

Testimony of Time

That clearly brings out the unique greatness of Chanakya. He achieved the almost impossible—of founding an Empire without any imperialistic aim. He had no aim of foreign conquest, no aim of imperial expansion, no aim of exploiting foreign peoples. His one and only objective was to consolidate the strength of Aryavarta, so that it might be able to withstand the attacks of foreign invaders.

And his work for freedom completed, Chankya retired to the seclusion of the forests, to pass his days in peace and penance. But the splended system of government his genius had built up, lasted for several generations. It lasted all through the 24 years of Chandragupta's reign, and all through the reigns of Bimbisara and Asoka. And foreign monarchs thought it prudent to retain friendly relations with Magadha.

E. R. G.